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Dramatic Suspense in the Photoplay

By DENISON CLIFT



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By

DENISON CLIFT

DIRECTOR FOX FEATURE FILMS

*One of a Series of Lectures Especially
Prepared for Student-Members
of The Palmer Plan*



PALMER PHOTOPLAY CORPORATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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DENISON CLIFT

DENISON CLIFT, the author of "Dramatic Suspense in the Photoplay," is a graduate of Stanford University. He entered the Motion Picture field in January, 1917, under Cecil B. deMille, and wrote photoplays for the Lasky Company. Later he wrote plays for William S. Hart and other famous stars under the supervision of Thomas H. Ince. When William Fox decided to star Madlaine Traverse in emotional dramas, he secured the services of Mr. Clift as a special feature writer. Mr. Clift has been a writer of Fox photoplays for two years. Within that period he was advanced to Scenario Editor, taking complete charge of the staff of writers; and recently he was again advanced to the position of Director, and is now directing his own stories. Mr. Clift is one of the very few directors in the art who writes his own story, prepares his own continuity, or working version of the story, directs the feature, and cuts the film for final exhibition.

THE PHOTOPLAY, while the expression of an emotional art, is subject to laws which, intelligently handled, make it possible, in the hands of the true artist, to produce an artistic achievement one hundred per cent perfect. The science of photoplay-making is just as exacting as the science of mathematics. Perfect photoplays are not dashed off during the heat of emotion; they are built, scene by scene, with as calculating a precision as a mathematician solves a problem in higher mathematics. And just in proportion as the writer understands *how* to bring about the effects he desires to produce upon the emotions of the spectator, will he accomplish the function of a good photoplay.

Watch-Like Precision.

2. A perfect photoplay, which, unfortunately, is rarely seen, is as beautiful a piece of dramatic machinery as is a Swiss watch. In the watch every wheel, spring, jewel and pivot has its exact function; not a single wheel is included for any reason but to perfect the movement of the watch; and to remove any single part of the machinery means to stop the perfect movement, to upset the precise function of the whole.

3. There are two distinct phases of playmaking that must be understood before we can determine what differentiates a drama from a narrative, and comprehend the value and function of the element of *Suspense*. The first phase is the *Material*; and the second is the element of *Craftsmanship* as applied to the material.

4. If the Swiss watch were taken apart, and the wheels, springs, jewels and other parts were laid out in a row—that would represent the *Material*—each part perfected and intrinsically of the highest value. But the parts themselves would be useless without the brain of the creator to fit the parts together—to form the perfect whole, with each piece functioning to give life and movement to the instrument. The art of fitting the various pieces together is the art of *Craftsmanship*.

In photoplay-making, the selection of material is of

vital importance; but of equal importance is the knowledge of how to make the wheels go around; how to make the material function to produce the highest emotional effect upon the spectator.

Dramatic and Undramatic.

5. *What is dramatic?* In the making of photoplays, not everyone understands what is dramatic and what is not dramatic. From the early days of picture-making, the cinema has lent itself admirably to the presentation of spectacle—particularly spectacle of a violent nature.

Through misconception, or lack of knowledge, a reaching for *drama* has meant a reaching for *violence*. An action in itself, no matter how violent, is not necessarily dramatic. An automobile plunging off a cliff; a building consumed with flames; two men fighting with bare fists to the death—these things are violent, but can be done on the screen utterly without real dramatic significance.

6. But if we know, and love, the occupant of the plunging car; if a little child that we would willingly die to save, is in the burning building; if the outcome of the fight between the two men means the salvation or damnation of a woman's soul—then the scenes assume an element of *Suspense* which gives them dramatic value.

Violence Unnecessary.

7. It is not the violence of the deed in itself that is dramatic; it is the reaction of the deed upon a human soul that gives us great drama. In "Othello," it is not the killing of the innocent Desdemona that grips us, so much as the tremendously poignant awakening of Othello when he learns that the sweet wife that he has murdered is innocent. It is the reaction upon the soul of the man that holds us spellbound. In "Macbeth" it is not the murder of the King that matters so much as the reaction upon Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; it is their processes of soul *after* the murder that transfixes our interest. In "Romeo and Juliet" it is not so much the effect of the sleeping potion upon Juliet that tears and rips our emotions, as that great scene—perhaps the most poignant in all dramatic literature—

where, after the suicide of Romeo, in the tomb, Juliet awakens, crying plaintively for her lover. What scene could be fraught more with the element of *Suspense* than this?

Freytag characterizes such situations as the essence of drama. "It is not the presentation of an event for itself," he says, "but for its effect upon a human soul."

8. During the past decade the term "Punch" has become familiar to all writers of plays and photoplays. By *punch*, producers too often mean nothing more than *Violent Action*. The real meaning of *drama* is lost completely. There is more real drama in the last ten minutes of Ibsen's "A Doll's House," than there is in all the photoplays of *violence* put together—more real power in the quiet, spiritual scene of the man and woman across a table than in a dozen fights, fires or railroad wrecks. Nora and Helmer, at grips spiritually, mean more to the human race than can be estimated. No violence; just the exchange of thought; Nora, who has misunderstood the man she had married, now awakened, leaving him and her little children, to go out into the world and find herself and her relation to society. And as she goes, Helmer, believing that her act is impossible, listens breathlessly for the miracle. Will she really go, or will she turn back at the front door? We listen with the same intense, breathless interest as Helmer—and we hear the closing of the door as she goes out. The echo of that closing door has come down the years, the essence of spiritual and human significance, the embodiment of dramatic strength.

Ibsen, the master craftsman! "A Doll's House" contains every element of a perfect play.

9. The material was selected with the hand of a master; the play was built by the touch of genius. It affords one of the greatest studies in modern dramatic literature of what a play should be. And for students of the drama, there is a special edition of Ibsen's work, edited by William Archer, which will reveal the secrets of this master's workshop.*

* "From Ibsen's Workshop," Volume XII in the *Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

Careful Building.

How often, when we witness a wonderful play, do we wish that we could look beyond the presentation and see the processes that made possible the degree of perfection. That rare treat is almost always denied us. You have little idea of the tremendous amount of work that goes into making a good play. The process is laborious, making great mental demands. You build and build, and add and add. Then you begin to eliminate, bit by bit, sometimes a situation, sometimes a character, often a word in a subtitle; until in the end only the cream of the dramatic cream is left, and you have a play that is compact, simply told, with direction and power, with only a few central characters, and of which no part could be removed without ruining the whole.

10. In the photoplay, the tendency today is to write the story simply and with few characters. This is essential because of the length of the film. Features average 4,500 feet of film—five reels, of nine hundred feet each. Of the 4,500 feet, approximately 1,200 are demanded by subtitles. That leaves 3,300 feet of picture, a little over three reels of actual picture story. In that limited amount of film there is not space enough to tell an elaborate and complicated story, filled with many characters. If that mistake is made, certain sequences, or episodes, must be eliminated in the cutting.

The sequences cut out almost always contain vital motivation. Consequently, characterization suffers. The deeds of the characters are not motivated; sometimes we do not understand their mental processes; and the result is another poor photoplay.

Value of Simplicity.

This element of simplicity is stressed here, not only because the mechanics of picture-making demand it for a good picture, but because it conforms to the accepted canons of the art today.

11. The day of the simple, powerful play, with few characters, and with a single theme and thread of action, was initiated by Ibsen. Inasmuch as his type of play-

building is ideally adapted to the cinema, it will be valuable to dwell upon the secrets of Ibsen's workshop before narrowing ourselves to the function of *Suspense* alone.

12. If a personal word may be permitted, it has always been my observation, in the scenario departments of the studios, that the greater the artist, the greater the problems. Dramatic material makes a tremendous mental demand upon the writer in shaping it and moulding it for production. There is no easy road to success. There are no rewards in this business without intense labor. The writer who comes into the studio with a manuscript and says: "Well, here is the story. It came easy. I was able to do it in three days," probably has just a sequence of events and nothing more—scenes without structure, without characterization. Only what you put into a photoplay, will the producer and the spectator get out of it.

Photoplays Not "Dashed Off."

13. Photoplay-writing is a delicate and intricate art; no one ever attains the position of being able to sit down and write a play straight off without difficulty. The greater the artist the more will he labor to bring his work to the point of perfection; and as a consequence, the more will he suffer during the processes of conception, revision and beginning again.

I quote from William Archer, in his introduction to "From Ibsen's Workshop":

14. Of "A Doll's House" we possess a first brief memorandum, a fairly detailed scenario, a complete draft, in quite actable form, and a few detached fragments of dialogue. The complete draft is perhaps the most valuable of all the documents contained in this volume, since it shows us how, at a point at which many dramatists would have been more than content to write "Finis," the most characteristic part of Ibsen's work was only about to begin. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that all the traits which have most deeply impressed themselves on the public mind, and which constitute the true individuality of the play, prove to have been introduced during the process of revision.

15. This assertion the reader must verify for himself, by a comparison of the texts: I will merely enumerate a few of the traits of which the draft contains no indication. In the first act the business of the macaroons is not even suggested; there is none of the charming talk about the Christmas tree and the children's presents; no request on Nora's part that her present may take the form of money, no indication on Helmer's part that he regards her supposed extravagance as an inheritance from her father. It is notable throughout that neither Helmer's aestheticism nor the sensual element in his relation to Nora is nearly so much emphasized as in the completed play; while Nora's tendency to small fibbing—that vice of the unfree—scarcely appears at all. In the first scene with Dr. Rank, there is no indication either of the doctor's ill health or his pessimism: it seems as though he had at first been designed as a mere confident. In the draft, Nora, Helmer, and Rank discuss the case of Krogstad in a dispassionate way before Nora has learnt how vital it is to her. An enormous improvement was effected by the suppression of this untimely passage, which discounted the effect of the scene at the end of the act. That scene is not materially altered in the final version; but the first version contains no hint of the business of decorating the Christmas tree, or of Nora's wheedling Helmer by pretending to need his aid in devising her costume for the fancy-dress ball. Indeed, this ball has not yet entered Ibsen's mind. He thinks of it first as a children's party.

Ibsen's Revisions.

16. In the second act there is no scene with Mrs. Linden in which she remonstrates with Nora for having (as she thinks) borrowed money from Dr. Rank, and so suggests to her the idea of applying to him for aid. In the scene with Helmer, we miss, among other characteristic traits, his confession that the ultimate reason why he cannot keep Krogstad in the bank is that Krogstad, as an old schoolfellow, is so tactless as to be unduly familiar with him. When Rank enters, he speaks to Helmer and Nora of his failing health: it is an immeasurable improve-

ment which transfers this passage, in a carefully-polished form, to his scene with Nora alone. Of the famous silk-stocking scene—that curious sidelight on Nora's relations with Helmer—there is not a trace. There is no hint of Nora's appeal to Rank for help, nipped in the bud by his declaration of love for her. All these elements we find in the second draft of the scene. In this draft, Rank says: "Helmer, himself might quite well know every thought I have ever had of you; he shall know them when I am gone." If Ibsen had retained this speech it might have saved much critical misunderstanding of a perfectly harmless episode. Even when the end of the second act is reached, Ibsen has not yet conceived the idea of the fancy ball and the rehearsal of the tarantella. It is not a very admirable invention, but it is at any rate better than the strained and arbitrary incident which, in the draft, brings the act to a close.

Compression and Simplification.

17. Very noteworthy is the compression and simplification to which Ibsen has subjected the earlier scenes of the third act. In the draft, they are clumsy and straggling. The scene between Helmer, Nora and Rank has absolutely none of the subtlety and tragic intensity which it has acquired in the finished form. To compare the two versions is to see a perfect instance of the transmutation of dramatic prose into dramatic poetry. There is in the draft no indication either of Helmer's being warmed with wine, or of the excitement of the senses which gives the final touch of tragedy to Nora's despair. The process of the action in the final scene is practically the same in both versions; but everywhere the revision has given a sharper edge to things. In the draft, for instance, when Krogstad's letter has lifted the weight of apprehension from Helmer's mind, he cries: "You are saved, Nora, you are saved!" In the revised form, Ibsen has cruelly altered this into: "I am saved, Nora, I am saved!" Finally, we have to note that Nora's immortal repartee, "Millions of women have done so," was an after-thought. But was there ever a more brilliant one?

Source of Vital Lessons.

18. I have dwelt upon these comparative versions of Ibsen's masterpiece at length because of the vital lessons to be learned therefrom, and because from this play we have one of the most splendid examples of *Suspense* to be found in modern drama. That Ibsen himself labored and revised, and suffered in the process, there is no doubt; but the results reveal to us what patience, and the exercise of science and craftsmanship, will accomplish in the photoplay. And in handling the element of *Suspense*, Ibsen stands without a peer.*

Analyzing Ibsen.

19. Nora, to save her husband's life, has forged her father's name to a note to secure funds with which to take Helmer away. Later Helmer returns, with health regained, but Nora secretly saves to pay back the forged note to Krogstad, from whom she has borrowed the money. Now, Helmer is made manager of the new Joint Stock Bank; he gives Krogstad notice of dismissal from the Bank. Krogstad is desperate and comes to Nora to ask her to plead with Helmer to allow him to retain his position in the Bank. Krogstad tells Nora that she *must* do this, not so much because of the money and the position, but because at one time in his life he made a mistake; now he is beginning to climb up the ladder again, and he has growing sons in whose eyes he must resurrect his character.

NORA: But I assure you, Mr. Krogstad, I have no power to help you.

KROGSTAD: Very well. I may tell you once more: you are on the edge of a precipice; you have everything to

** I have purposely dealt with examples of Ibsen's plays for several reasons. Ibsen was a super-craftsman and a master of suspense; yet in the instances that I have illustrated with excerpts from his plays, dialogue has been introduced, which is largely forbidden in the photoplay. Thus the student may, through careful analysis, determine how much of Ibsen may be adapted to the screen, in what manner such adaptation may be accomplished and to what degree it may be effective. In the photoplay productions of Ibsen that have been made, the tensify of dramatic suspense has been present but not to so great an extent as in the original plays. This serves to emphasize the indisputable fact that the most successful photoplays must be written for the screen by writers steeped in the technique of action and not adapted from stage plays, novels or any other forms of expression.*

lose; your whole future; everything, I tell you. If I am flung into the gutter a second time, you shall keep me company.

20. Krogstad leaves. Nora appeals to Helmer to retain Krogstad in the Bank, but Helmer is astonished at this, and declares that that is impossible, as Krogstad was once guilty of forgery. He turns a deaf ear to Nora's pleading. Krogstad returns. Nora, caught in her tragic dilemma, is told that unless she succeeds in saving him, he will write all the circumstances of Nora's forgery of her father's name to the note, and drop the letter in Helmer's letter-box. Nora is helpless. With tragic gaze she sees Krogstad leave, and the letter drop into the letter-box in the front door. She tries to open the box, but in vain. She induces Helmer not to bother with his mail until the dance is over. Nora stands a moment collecting her thoughts; then looks at the clock.

NORA: Seven hours till midnight. Then twenty-four hours till the next midnight. Then the tarantella will be over. Twenty-four and seven? Thirty-one hours to live!

Superb Example.

21. Could there be a more superb example of dramatic suspense? Nora, the tragic figure, caught between two conflicting forces, herself to be the helpless victim! Here is a study in the skillful use of *Suspense* that every student of the photoplay should understand. The mechanical device of the menacing letter in Helmer's letter-box brings the situation about, but the events leading up to this dramatic moment all grow out of character, well motivated. Let us analyze these motives and discover with what deft maneuvers Ibsen brings this about.

A. Nora Helmer has committed forgery, by signing her father's name, in order to secure twelve hundred dollars with which to save her sick husband's life.

B. Torvald Helmer, recovered, is made manager of the Joint Stock Bank; and is about to dismiss Nils Krogstad, the man from whom Nora borrowed the money, and who was formerly himself guilty of forgery.

C. Krogstad, realizing that ruin faces him, goes to Nora, informs her that he has discovered her forgery, and threatens her with exposure to her husband unless she intercedes for him and helps him to retain his position in the Bank.

D. Nora, fearful of exposure, pleads with Helmer, only to have Helmer tell her that what she asks is impossible, as Krogstad is ruined morally.

E. Krogstad returns for his answer, and poor Nora is forced to tell him how helpless she is to save him. At this, Krogstad becomes furious, goes out, and drops the letter, relating the act of Nora's forgery, into the letter-box.

22. Step by step, with decisive, sure strokes, the *Suspense* is built up. And once built up, it is sustained to the very end, when, the tarantella over, Helmer at last opens his mail, discovers the truth, and turns in condemnation upon his wife. Mrs. Linden, a mutual friend, acts upon Krogstad, and through love, induces him to withdraw his threats. But Helmer's attitude of selfishness and condemnation has been revealed in a blinding flash to Nora, and, feeling that she can never live with the man with whom she has no spiritual bond, she goes out of his life.*

Craftsmanship.

23. *Can you, through your art, inject anything into your work more powerful or effective than the material itself offers?*

The answer to this question is the answer of Craftsmanship, or Technique. In Ibsen's plays is to be found great material, with thought, ideas, and striking subject-matter. But to this subject-matter he brought to bear the power of Craftsmanship, which shaped and moulded the material into dramatic form, giving to it the quality of Entertainment.

24. There are two great elements which concern the writer of photoplays. These are:

A. The element of *Intensifying* the material so as to

* Photoplay versions of "A Doll's House" have been made by Universal Films, with Dorothy Phillips, and by Artcraft, with Elsie Ferguson.

render it as striking and vivid as possible in its appeal to the emotions and the intellect; the other is

B. The art of injecting *Suspense* into the play; and this is purely the art of mechanics, which can be learned by anyone who will devote time and study to the undertaking.

25. Drama is made of two vital forces: Conflict and Suspense.

Conflict in the beginning excites your sympathies and prejudices.

Suspense sustains that emotional excitement until the end.

The master stroke of dramatic craftsmanship is the remodeling of a narrative into a dramatic action by the element of *Suspense*.

This converting process was characteristic of all of Shakespeare's works. He selected striking narrative material; and by the application of craftsmanship, notably Dramatic Suspense, he transformed the material from narrative to drama.

26. Now, the question arises, What is the secret of *Dramatic Suspense*, and how is it to be applied to the material?

Dramatic Suspense is acquired by three major devices:

A. By Foreknowledge, which is the art of disclosing to the spectator what a character does not know.

B. By arousing at the outset, a deep and poignant sympathy for a character, and then developing a powerful menace which threatens the happiness, or life, of the character. Until this menace is removed the Suspense is maintained.

C. By the general construction of the Plot, which arouses uncertainty as to the outcome.

Let us take each of these elements, and by practical examples reveal to the student *how* the principle is to be effectively used.

Foreknowledge.

27. Foreknowledge, skillfully used, is one of the most powerful elements in developing dramatic situations.

By Foreknowledge is meant that knowledge which is given to the spectator, and which is not shared by other characters in a play. For example: Jones gets off the street car on a dark night and walks a block toward his home. At the corner, in hiding, is Brown, with revolver in hand, waiting, for an adequate reason, to take Jones's life. Now, if you know all the time during which Jones gets off the car and walks to the point where Brown is hiding, that he is in danger of losing his life, your interest is quickened; you are on the *qui vive* to see what the outcome will be; and, if your sympathies have been aroused in Jones, you are actuated with a high degree of fear. Every trifling thing that Jones may do now is dramatic. On the other hand, if you do not know that Brown is waiting to kill Jones, then everything that Jones does is undramatic, and not until the instant that the shot is fired, and Jones falls dead, are you aroused. But this swift and single instant of Surprise is not sufficiently dramatic to offset the ruinous and deadly ineffective period of time while Jones was walking from the car to the corner. Therefore, the rule to remember is this: That while Surprise is a powerful element of drama, unless the Surprise is sufficiently striking, and worth keeping, it is always far better to let the spectator in on the secret, so that everything that transpires may be fraught with tense and gripping interest.

28. The most noteworthy example of Suspense engendered by Foreknowledge is the famous screen scene from "The School for Scandal." Read this scene over. Regard it from two different standpoints. First, read the scene without the knowledge that Lady Teazle is hiding behind the screen. Notice how comparatively flat and insipid are the comments of the men before the screen, and how there is nothing to anticipate, nothing to stir your imagination and make it leap forward to an obligatory moment, which appeals to your pleasurable emotions—the moment when the screen will be dropped and Lady Teazle will be revealed as having heard all that was said. Having done this, read the scene again, as Sheridan intended it, and see the transformation of the meaningless

words into lines of sparkling flavor, capturing your interest and your imagination, and making you anticipate with the keenest pleasure the discomfort of Lady Teazle's detractors when the screen shall fall.

29. The secret of the entire scene lies in the art of playing upon the anticipation of the audience by means of disclosing the secret to them. Every trifling act and bit of dialogue then becomes fascinating and dramatic.

Sympathy and Menace.

30. Belasco's "The Girl of the Golden West" affords a good example of *Suspense* engendered by arousing a deep and poignant sympathy in a character, and then threatening the character with the menace of unhappiness.

Minnie, the Girl, is operating the saloon at Cloudy Mountain, a California mining camp in '49. To the camp comes Dick Johnson, a stranger, in reality Ramerrez, a road agent. Ramerrez has come to rob the Girl, but remains to love her. She invites him to her cabin on the top of the mountain. Ramerrez goes. His identity is discovered, and Sheriff Jack Rance comes for him. The Stranger is driven out into the storm, is shot, and returns to the Girl's cabin. Minnie hides him in the loft. Jack Rance, who loves the Girl, comes back, sure that the Stranger has taken refuge in the cabin. The Girl succeeds in convincing him that Ramerrez is not in the cabin, and Rance is about to go when a drop of blood from the wounded man falls upon his handkerchief, revealing the fugitive's hiding place. Rance forces the wounded man to come down. The Girl then proposes that she and Rance play a game of poker. If the Girl wins, she is to have the stranger; if Rance wins, he is to have her in marriage. They play. Rance wins, but in a moment of surprise, the Girl cheats, deftly lifts a pair of winning cards from her stocking, and claims the man she loves.

31. A bare recital of the story cannot give the melodramatic effectiveness of the situation. In the first act of the play your sympathies are so deeply aroused for the girl, that when she is playing with Rance, and her whole life's happiness is at stake, you await breathlessly the out-

come, with fear dominant. When the girl cheats, the surprise is strikingly affective. Just what you want to happen, happens; but the art of *Suspense* makes it impossible, until the very last moment, to determine just *how* the Girl will be saved.

Effective Example.

32. Henry Bernstein wrote "The Thief," which was first produced at the Theatre de la Renaissance, Paris, December 7, 1906.*

"The Thief" affords an example which for general effectiveness of structure has hardly been eclipsed among modern dramatic productions.

Only six persons are concerned with the main action. Marie-Louise and her husband Richard are visiting at the fine country house of Raymond Lagardes and his wife Isabel. Twenty thousand francs have been stolen. A private detective, Monsieur Zambault, has been called in by Raymond Lagardes to solve the mystery. M. Zambault is forced to the conclusion that Fernand, Raymond's son, is the thief. Marie-Louise has been carrying on a flirtation with Fernand, and now, when this shocking disclosure is made by the detective, Marie-Louise goes out into the pavilion of the garden to summon Fernand. Faced by the evidence, Fernand at first denies, then admits his guilt. Marie-Louise and Richard retire to their bedroom to leave the parents of Fernand alone with their sorrow.

33. Now follows a second act, played in the bedroom between only two persons, Marie-Louise and Richard, and running for forty-five minutes, which for sheer dramatic intensity, has no equal among modern plays. Marie-Louise, and not Fernand, is the thief. Here is an anomaly among plays; an example where the dramatist did not take the spectator into his confidence, but by virtue of sheer dramatic power, held the interest while the husband mercilessly tears down the wife's alibi, and reveals her the thief. It is a remarkable example where the power of structure engenders and sustains *Suspense*.

* "The Thief" is published by Doubleday, Page & Co., New York, in the Drama League Series. Translated by John Alan Haughton. A photoplay version was made by the Fox Film Corporation several years ago.

34. At the curtain on Act One we think that Fernand is the thief. Now Marie-Louise and Richard enter their bedroom. Richard is overcome at the blow that has fallen upon his friend's shoulders. Marie-Louise says that Raymond will get over it. She takes a card-case from the bosom of her gown and hides it in a drawer of her dresser. Richard then speculates upon Fernand's confession, saying that he can hardly believe it true—that Fernand could not have opened the drawer that contained the money with a penknife. He will prove it. He tries to open the drawer in which Marie-Louise has slipped the card-case. Marie-Louise protests. But Richard overrides her protest; he comes upon the card-case, and finds in it a huge roll of bills. They are in moderate circumstances, and he marvels that his wife has been able to save so much money. He comes upon clothes of Marie-Louise's that surprises him with their beauty and costliness. Then the truth breaks over him. Marie-Louise lies, but Richard tears down her fabric of lies until, breathless and overcome, she admits that she is the thief. There is a pause here—while Richard grasps the horror of the situation. Then Richard demands to know *why* Fernand took his wife's guilt upon his shoulders. He accuses Marie-Louise of being Fernand's mistress. Marie-Louise rises in flaming protest; and, face to face, husband and wife await the coming of the dawn.

35. In the morning, Marie-Louise confesses to Raymond that she stole the francs, to buy beautiful clothes in order to appear lovely in her husband's eyes and hold his love. This confession saves Fernand from being sent to Brazil; and instead, Richard and Marie-Louise, forgiven, leave for Pauillac. Again, a recital of the story fails to convey a true sense of its power. The secret of its strength lies in the structure: the formation of a strong situation; the suspicion of the husband; the powerful inquisition scene in which the spectator is in the position of the husband tearing down the wife; the admission, little by little, by the wife that she has lied—that she has not told all the truth; and then the final breakdown, and the confession that she is the thief. Suspense is admirably sustained

throughout; but it is not the Suspense of Foreknowledge, nor of Sympathy and Menace; but Suspense arising from the design, which is that of an inquisitor tearing down his victim.

Partial Analysis.

36. In the case of each of the plays that we have examined, the life of the piece arises from the element of *Suspense*—uncertainty as to the outcome, once the sympathy of the spectator is aroused. The same story, in each instance, could be told in narrative form, without the element of *Suspense* so powerfully defined. The student will find it a valuable study to read or witness the plays, and then write out the plot in a form which robs it of its dramatic power. Inversely, take your own stories and go over them with this knowledge of how to create *Suspense* in mind, and see if you have handled your material in a way to excite and sustain interest. If you have, your plays will contain the element that will hold the attention of any reader, and make the stories salable; if not, it is a matter of study and application to master the principle. But once mastered, you will be amazed to discover how commonplace stories can be transformed by craftsmanship, and how ordinary material may be rendered gripping and fascinating. The ideal method is to select subject-matter that is intrinsically interesting, and add to it your power of play-building, striving always to achieve a perfect result. Knowledge of dramatic principles and persistent, painstaking work will accomplish this.

37. Voltaire was one day explaining to a friend a series of revisions that he was engaged in making in the manuscript of one of his plays. "But," argued the friend, "these alterations are really trifling." The great dramatist smiled, and his answer was one that may be heeded by us all. "That may be so," he said, "but remember, it is these trifles which engender perfection; and perfection itself is no trifle."

Devison Clift





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